

The 2002 legislative session promises to be an interesting one.

Leading the parade of issues will be the budget for the 2003 fiscal year. For the second year running, the legislative leadership and Governor Ronnie Musgrove have locked horns on the revenue estimate. Musgrove argued last year that the estimate for the current fiscal year was too high, and he was proven more than right as the Legislative Budget Committee revised its original estimate of nearly four percent to less than one percent. To his credit, Musgrove hasn't been too aggressive in reminding the Legislature of this fact.

One would hope lawmakers would be more willing to compromise this year, but that isn't the case. Basing the current year's revisions on the tragedies of September 11 (even though the worst month to date was August), the Legislative Budget Committee remains convinced the revenue estimate of more than four percent for 2003 is reasonable. Time will tell, but the current situation suggests the Committee would do well to meet Musgrove halfway on the estimate.

Central points of the budget battle will include the teacher pay raise (cemented in the July special session that removed the five percent growth provision) and how to deal with shortfalls in Medicaid and Corrections. Teacher raises will be a high priority now that they're law. Agency deficits brought on by legislative demands will surely be political hot potatoes.

Musgrove is sure to have an aggressive plan of action for the session. His health care proposal offers strong options for addressing health issues. The creative and forward-thinking funding plan for the proposal, which seeks to use a portion of the annual tobacco payments to maximize matching federal funds, offers a good use of the tobacco settlement revenue while keeping the Health Care Trust Fund intact. The fight will come when legislators look to dig into the trust fund to make up budget shortfalls.

Bottom line: We're looking at three months of hard and contentious battles over several issues. Let's hope the people in power are able to master the art of compromise before the hole we're in gets any deeper.